

BUILD SKILLS

from Moby-Dick

LITERARY ANALYSIS

A symbol is a person, place, or thing that has its own meaning and also represents something else. Writers often use symbols that appear in the literature of many different cultures. Such symbols are called **archetypes**. For example, Melville's whale is like the whale that swallows Jonah in the Bible. However, Moby-Dick is an extremely complex symbol. To understand Moby-Dick's meaning, examine every aspect of the whale's behavior and appearance.

- Moby-Dick is massive, threatening, and awe-inspiring yet beautiful.
- Moby-Dick seems unpredictable but is controlled by natural laws.
- Moby-Dick seems immortal and indifferent to human suffering.

Analyzed in this way, Moby-Dick seems to symbolize all that is mysterious and uncontrollable in life.

READING STRATEGY

To recognize symbols, look for characters, places, or objects that are mentioned repeatedly or linked to larger concepts. For example, Ahab's description of Moby-Dick gives the whale symbolic meaning:

I see him in outrageous strength,
with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.
That inscrutable malice is chiefly what I
hate . . .

From this description, you might guess that Moby-Dick symbolizes nature's destructive power. Use this chart to record and interpret other symbols.

